

LBRIS

We know
books



Barbara O'Connor

Wish



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One

I looked down at the paper on my desk.

The “Getting to Know You” paper.

At the top, Mrs. Willibey had written “Charlemagne Reese.”

I put a big X over *Charlemagne* and wrote “Charlie.”

My name is Charlie. Charlemagne is a dumb name for a girl and I have told my mama that about a gazillion times.

I looked around me at all the hillbilly kids doing math in their workbooks.

My best friend, Alvina, told me they would be hillbilly kids.

“You will hate it in Colby,” she said. “There’s just red dirt roads and hillbilly kids there.” She had flipped her

silky hair over her shoulder and added, "I bet they eat squirrels."

I glanced at the lunch boxes under the desks around me and wondered if there were any squirrel sandwiches in them.

I looked back down at the paper in front of me. I was supposed to fill in all this stuff so my new teacher could get to know me.

On the line beside *Describe your family*, I wrote, "Bad."

What is your favorite subject in school? "None."

List three of your favorite activities. "Soccer, ballet, and fighting."

Two of those favorite activities were lies but one of them was the truth.

I am fond of fighting.

My sister, Jackie, inherited Daddy's inky black hair and I inherited his fiery red temper. If I had a nickel for every time I've heard "The apple don't fall far from the tree," I'd be rich. Daddy fights so much that everybody calls him Scappy. In fact, at this very minute, while I'm stuck here in Colby, North Carolina, surrounded by hill-billy kids, ole Scappy is back in Raleigh in the county jail again because of his fondness for fighting.

And I don't need a crystal ball to know that at this very minute, in our house in Raleigh, smack-dab in the middle of the day, Mama is in bed with the curtains drawn and empty soda cans on the nightstand. She will stay in that bed the livelong day. If I was there, she wouldn't care one little bit if I went to school or stayed on the couch watching TV and eating cookies for lunch.

"But that's just the tip of the iceberg," that social services lady said when she rattled off a list of reasons why I was getting shipped off to this sorry excuse for a town to live with two people I didn't even know. "It's better to stay with kin," she told me. "Gus and Bertha are kin."

"What kind of kin?" I asked.

She explained how Bertha is Mama's sister and Gus is her husband. She said they didn't have any kids and they were happy to take me in.

"Then how come Jackie gets to stay with Carol Lee?" I asked about a million times. Carol Lee is Jackie's best friend. She lives in a fancy brick house with a swimming pool. Her mama gets out of bed every morning and her daddy is not called Scappy.

So that lady told me again how Jackie was practically a grownup and would be graduating from high school in a couple of months.

When I pointed out that I was in fifth grade and not exactly a baby, she sighed and smiled a fake smile and said, "Charlie, you have to live with Gus and Bertha for a while."

I'd never laid eyes on those people and now I was supposed to *live* with them? When I asked how long I had to be there, she said until things settled down and Mama got her feet on the ground.

Well, how hard is it to put your dang feet on the ground? is what I thought about that.

"You need a stable family environment," she told me. But I knew what she really meant was, "You need a family that's not all broken like yours is."

Still, I whined and argued and whined and argued, but here I am in Colby, North Carolina, staring down at this "Getting to Know You" paper.

"Have you finished, Charlemagne?" Mrs. Willibey was suddenly beside me.

"My name is Charlie," I said, and a greasy-haired boy in the front of the class let out a sputtering laugh. I sent one of my famous glares his way till he hushed up and turned red.

I handed Mrs. Willibey that paper and watched her eyes dart back and forth as she read it. Her neck got

splotchy red and the corners of her mouth twitched. She didn't even look at me before she marched back up to the front of the room and dropped that paper on her desk like it was a hot potato.

I slumped down in my seat and wiped my sweaty palms on my shorts. It was only April, but it was already hot as blazes.

"You want me to help you with that?" The boy in front of me pointed at the math worksheet on my desk. He had red hair and wore ugly black glasses.

"No," I said.

He shrugged, took a pencil out of his desk, and headed to the pencil sharpener.

Up.

Down.

Up.

Down.

That's how he walked.

Like one leg was shorter than the other.

And he dragged one foot along the floor, so his sneaker made squeaking noises.

I glanced at the clock.

Dang it! I had missed 11:11.

I have a list of all the ways there are to make a wish,

like seeing a white horse or blowing a dandelion. Looking at a clock at exactly 11:11 is on my list. I'd learned that from some old man who owned the bait and tackle shop out by the lake where Scrappy and I used to go fishing. Now that I'd missed 11:11, I was going to have to find another way to get in my wish for the day. I hadn't missed one single day of making my wish since the end of fourth grade, so I sure didn't want to miss one now.

Then Mrs. Willibey nodded toward that redheaded boy sharpening his pencil and said, "Howard, why don't you be Charlie's Backpack Buddy for a while?"

Mrs. Willibey explained that when a new kid comes to school, their Backpack Buddy shows them around and tells them the rules till they get settled.

Howard grinned and said, "Yes, ma'am," and that was that. I had a Backpack Buddy whether I wanted one or not.

The rest of the afternoon crept along so slow I couldn't hardly stand it. I stared out the window while kids took turns bragging about their social studies projects. A misty rain had begun to fall and dark gray clouds hovered over the tops of the mountains in the distance.

When the bell finally rang, I hightailed it out of there and headed for the bus. I hurried up the aisle and dropped

into the last row. I kept my eyes on a piece of dried-up chewing gum stuck to the seat in front of me while I sent laser thoughts zipping and zapping around the bus.

Do not sit next to me.

Do not sit next to me.

Do not sit next to me.

If I had to be stuck on a bus full of kids I didn't even know, I wanted to at least sit by myself.

My laser thoughts seemed to be working, so I took my eyes off of the gum and glanced out the window.

That redheaded boy with the up-down walk was hurrying toward the bus, his backpack bouncing against him with every step.

When he got on the bus, I quickly looked back at the gum and sent my laser thoughts out again.

But that boy didn't waste a minute shuffling up the aisle and plopping himself right down next to me.

Then he thrust his hand out at me and said, "Hey. I'm Howard Odom." He pushed at his ugly black glasses and added, "Your Backpack Buddy."

Now, what kind of kid shakes hands like that? No kid I ever knew.

He kept his hand there and stared me down till I couldn't help myself. I shook hands with him.

"Charlie Reese," I said.

"Where you from?"

"Raleigh."

"Why're you here?"

He sure was nosy. But I figured if I laid out the cold hard truth, that would shut him up, and maybe he wouldn't want to be my Backpack Buddy anymore.

"My daddy's in jail and my mama won't get out of bed," I said.

Well, that boy didn't even blink an eye. "What's he in jail for?"

"Fighting."

"Why?"

"What do you mean?"

He wiped at his fogged-up glasses with the bottom of his T-shirt. His face was flushed pink in the damp heat of the bus. "Why was he fighting?" he said.

I shrugged. There was no telling why Scrappy was fighting. Besides, there were probably a bunch of other reasons he was in jail, but nobody ever tells me anything.

"Gus and Bertha told my mama you were coming. They go to my church and I gave them a cat one time," Howard said. "A scrawny gray cat that was living up under my porch."

Then he went on and on about how Gus taught him how to make a slingshot and how sometimes Bertha sells bread-and-butter pickles by the side of the road in the summer. How his mama drove her car right into the ditch beside Gus and Bertha's driveway one time and Gus pulled it out with a tractor and then they all ate barbecue sandwiches in the front yard.

"You'll like living with them," he said.

"I'm not *living* with them," I told him. "I'm going back to Raleigh."

"Oh." He looked down at his freckly hands in his lap. "When?"

"When my mama gets her feet on the ground."

"How long does that take?"

I shrugged. "Not long."

But the knot in my stomach told me that was a lie. The worry clutching at my heart told me my mama might never get her feet on the ground.

As the bus pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward town, Howard rattled off a list of school bus rules. No saving seats. No gum. No writing on the back of the seats. No cussing. A whole mess of rules that I was pretty sure nobody paid any mind to except maybe Howard.